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Prologue

Unexpectedly I felt a slight sense of confusion, as if I had been hurled into a place I didn't know.

However, it quickly occurred to me that I did in fact know this place, and I let out a sigh of relief.

The same place as always.

It was the place in this city that was closest to the sky.

A place I could relax.

My favorite place.

The place where I'd always stop on my way back from work.

This time, I thought I saw the figure of another person in the darkness.

A girl.

She was wearing some kind of school uniform, and she swayed in the wind. She was standing on the rooftop of the opposite apartment building.

I didn't know her name. I had no way of talking to her.

We simply looked at each other, separated by the night sky and city lights.

No, it was possible that I was the only one who thought that. Maybe she hadn't even realized I was here.

As to confirm it, her gaze never left her feet.

Below us was the city at night. Just one step forward and the distant streets would rush up to meet you.

She didn’t move from her spot, but after some time I saw her bite her lip, like she had come to a decision.

I watched her take a step.

I shouted in panic. I couldn’t get the words to come out. My voice didn’t reach her.

However, before too long she retracted her foot.

Turning back, she walked away, disappearing out of sight.

She never noticed me there the entire time.

That was my first encounter with “Hinata.”

Chapter 1

The wind tonight was colder than usual.

It was technically still the second semester, but we had been done with our final exams for a while now, so it already felt like I was on break.

I just needed my paycheck for the month and I’d be all set for the winter.

“I’ll be going now.”

“Good work today. You have school tomorrow?”

The store manager spoke up from behind as I punched my time card.

“Yeah. Well, just the closing ceremony, so I’ll be done before noon.”

“In that case, can you come in after that?”

I turned around to see the manager beaming at me.

“Uh, I kinda have plans, so can I just take my normal evening shift?”

It wasn’t like I had anything set in stone, but I suspected that I'd be going to the larger city nearby, in order to hang out with my classmates once things wrapped up in the morning.

“Ah, can’t be helped if you’ve got something already.” He nodded, looking a little disappointed but never breaking his smile.

It was impossible to figure out the age of my ever-grinning boss. He looked like he was in his twenties, but every once in a while I’d get the feeling he was really twice that. The person in question wasn’t about to answer, so the truth remained a mystery.

I made my preparations to leave and exited the store. All of the other businesses in the shopping arcade had their shutters down. It wasn’t exactly close to the train station, so there weren’t many people around this late in the day. Even the various sign boards had already been pulled inside their respective shops, safely tucked away.

My part-time job was at a fairly famous sweets store famed for its crepes and waffles. Apparently it had even been featured on a tv show, although that was before I started working there. If I recall correctly, it was a long running variety show that aired in the evenings, about trying to crown a champion in all sorts of fields. Maybe that was the reason that the shop was always shorthanded once the sun went down. Thanks to that even the manager himself was working on the front lines, and during the busiest times it really did have the feel of fighting an all-out war. The manager led by initiative, always placing himself on the same level as the other staff, and because of that he was well-liked by the other part-timers. He was one of the reasons I stayed, even though it was far from my school (which was at a different station).

However, although he was usually an ideal boss, he would occasionally lapse into his troublesome habit of making strange products that he'd claim were test items. Most of these dishes usually had, how do I put this, a dangerous aroma that was oddly spicy, or sweet, or didn't smell quite like food. What's more, even though they were supposed to be tests, he'd go ahead and add them to the menu as new items, despite the fact that not a single staff member who tried them voiced their approval. However, there were also times that customers would come to enjoy the new selections, and when that happened I could only marvel at how different people's tastes were.

Speaking of, one of the shop's regulars, who came by almost everyday, always purchased a large order of the strangely sweet variety. A girl who wore her long hair in braided pigtails. And now that I'm remembering, there was this time where I casually recommended that she try the spicy kind, and after eating one she didn't come back for a week…

Thinking about this as I walked, I was at the end of the shopping arcade before I knew it. It would take another seventeen minutes to get from here to my apartment. Not so far that it was worth taking the bus over, but not that insignificant a walk either. A bicycle would have been the best option, but I just kept passing whenever I had the opportunity to buy one. For starters I commuted to my school by train, but there was another reason that walking suited me better.

Leaving the arcade behind I look up at the sky. The sun had gone down hours ago, off to visit some other country. The sky was completely dark. There wasn't a single cloud, making it a truly perfect night to go stargazing. The unusually chilly breeze concerned me, but that was just proof of how clear the air was.

“I’ll just have to bear with it…” My muttered words came out as a white fog and hung in the darkness. I veered slightly away from the road which would take me home. I’d be stopping at that place again tonight. At this hour it was more convenient to go on foot.

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I wonder when it was that coming here before going home became part of my daily life. A high-rise apartment building standing over its surroundings, a little outside the heart of the city. It was about twice as tall as my own apartment building (which was also definitely not as impressive). Illuminated by the lights at the entrance, the brick colored walls floated in the night. Passing through the gate, which remained open for its residents even after dark, I continued through the front entrance, lit up like an airport runway. At this time of night about half of the regularly spaced rooms had their lights out already. I pushed open the glass door and entered the lobby. The building superintendent’s office was right in front of me, but unattended. It seems they were always gone by this time, and I had never even once seen them.

Next to the office was another glass door, the kind that slid to the side. At first glance it looked like the type that locked, although it was really just a normal automatic door. There was also a security camera, but I had seen a fake camera with this exact shape sold at Tokyu Hands, so it was possible that this was just another dummy camera for appearances only. Even if it was real, I had never been very worried about it from the start. I was only here to go to one place. Of course, trespassing is still trespassing, so what I was doing wasn’t exactly admirable…

Now that I was inside the actual building, I made my way to the usual emergency stairs. The steel fire door was heavy and grandiose, seeming to say, ‘Don’t use me, *even if* it’s an emergency.’

I placed my hand on the door knob and opened it very slowly, so that I wouldn’t disturb any of the building’s inhabitants. A much colder air immediately pushed through the gap. The door knob itself must have also been very cold, but I couldn’t tell because I had gloves on. I sighed, thinking that the outside must be even worse, but the drafty air whisked my breath away before it was able to cloud over.

Yeah, it would be bad if someone saw me here. I squeezed myself through the narrow crack and out onto the fire escape. The stairs here faced the external wall of the building. In other words, it was the same as being outside. As I started my climb I was struck by the obvious: Winter is cold.

This apartment building had ten floors. My destination was the eleventh. The roof.

§

The wind was bitterly cold.

A wintry wind far more intense than anything at ground level.

The frigid air swirled around me.

A sharp gust of wind cut across my bare face, my ears, over the hem of my coat.

“Damn cold…”

So cold that my voice cracked as I inadvertently spoke. I instinctively covered my ears with my gloved hands. They must be bright red right now. Every so often the wind would die down, seemingly out of whimsy, but that didn’t do anything to change how

cold it was. And then it was immediately back again, pouring down from the rooftop and raging over me before disappearing once more.

I moved like the wind was carrying me.

Eventually I reached the protective fencing.

Clank The fence groaned.

I slowly turned my gaze outward.

The scene I had been hoping to see was waiting for me.

A completely different side of the city I knew.

The streets glowed orange from the light of passing cars, and mercury-vapor lamps dimly illuminated the back alleys. It should have been completely dark, but the light from the ground coated the sky in a pale haze, even though the occasionally visible star silently insisted it was the middle of the night.

I loved this sky.

I loved this scenery.

That was why I loved this spot.

Another facet of the city that you'd normally never be able to witness.

At some point I had completely forgotten about the cold, and leaning against the fence I raised my head to the sky.

The wind was strong, but there were still no clouds.

I felt like I'd gotten a little bit closer to the stars again.

The memory of my first time here flashed through my head. It had been back when I just started living on my own, about a week into my senior year of high school.

I received a telephone call from home, the first one since I had moved. The news was what I expected. Following that I immediately went out to walk the city streets at night. But back then the hustle and bustle of the city had been too much for me, and before I realized it I was alone, at this spot, looking down over everything.

It was quiet. The city was at my feet.

At that time, I hadn't yet realized how beautiful it all was from here. I only realized it when I saw the view again from up close.

When I started high school I was still living with my parents. I told them I wanted to live on my own once I started my senior year. It wasn't that hard to convince them. I felt like my existence as an only child had become a burden on the family. I thought they would be better off if I wasn't there.

And then, right after I moved out, my parents got divorced. That call from home was them tersely announcing it.

I knew it.

I should have known it…

And for just a brief instant, I thought I understood this city as it really was. Although looking back now, I couldn't really remember what I realized.

"I better get going soon…"

With some effort I stood back up, and then I surveyed the city one more time.

The amount of cars on the road had decreased significantly, as expected at this time of night. Some people still had to work though, and occasionally a large tractor trailer hauling cargo would drive by.

"...Hm?"

I spoke without thinking.

At that moment I thought I had seen a shadow.

Not from someone walking on the ground.

Much closer…

Widening my search, I spotted them right away. At the top of the next apartment building over (well, there was still a road dividing the two, so they weren't exactly right next to one another).

The line of sight was slightly higher on my side. Still, it was rare for there to be two people up here, at about the same height.

It was a girl. We were probably around the same age, although I wondered why she was still wearing her uniform. She had a dark red vest, and her blouse was white, or maybe a light pink. Her skirt matched her top. The loud colors and unusual design made it quite distinctive, but there wasn't any school with that uniform; at least, none that I was aware of.

I was sure that I'd never seen any of the girls who came into my store wearing something like that. Although it wasn't like I was able to memorize each and every uniform I saw, so it's possible I might have just forgotten.

Her hair was long and danced in the air, blown about by the nighttime wind. I'd catch a glimpse of red every so often as well, which I determined to be the ribbon on her hair clip. An oversized ribbon, also dancing in the wind.

I couldn't read her expression. She continued to stare at her feet, as if she was looking at something invisible. The city was in front of her. However, it was like her gaze was directed at empty space.

She almost looked like…

Clank

The girl jerked her head at the sound.

I had pushed against the face.

She stared out, over to the roof of the opposite apartment where she saw me. There was a surprised look on her face, like she had never expected there to be another person up here.

I waved to her.

No response. She looked down awkwardly.

I started waving both hands, not caring what she thought of me. I did ask myself what the hell I was doing, but when she saw me she lifted her head slightly.

But her expression remained stiff. So, as I continued flailing my arms I also started to jump up and down. Obviously she looked stunned, but she did seem to have relaxed a little, and she waved back, albeit hesitantly.

I thought I saw a smile, but it was clearly forced. There was still something mysterious about the girl floating in the night sky.